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SLASH RECORDS

After the Punk Revolution

By KRISTINE McKENNA

"It used to be if you had blue hair it was easy to get noticed. Now you have to blue hair and go naked," said Bob Biggs, a man who knows a thing or two about blue hair.

President of Slash Records, Los Angeles' most successful alternative record label, Biggs fell heir to the unenviable task of taking a record company born in the heat of the highly idealistic punk insurrection of 1977 and guiding it into the dollars-and-cents reality of 1987. Though he initially seemed an unlikely person for the job, Biggs has proved himself the perfect one for it.

A visual artist who grew up in Whittier, Biggs, 40, is not and never has been a punk. He wears custom-made suits from Claxton & Frinton, is a happily married homeowner and is only marginally interested in music. He is, however, very much his own man and saw running a record company specializing in punk as a way to apply and develop ideas he explored as a painter and video artist. Like new-wave Svengali Malcolm McLaren, Biggs is intrigued with the sociological implications of mass marketing.

"Compared to when Slash first started, the information level is incredibly high now," Biggs said amid Slash's comfortably cluttered quarters in West Hollywood. "Video made people aware that rock 'n' roll has a cultural coefficient and that kids want to wear the clothes, drink the drinks and talk like the bands they follow. But there are so many bands out now and so many ways to sell a record that you really have to go the extra distance to even be in the race.

"I was in a bank today and they had a TV monitor playing a video about the making of a movie about a bank heist. They were marketing the film by showing the video in banks! That's an indication of how pervasive and intense marketing has become."

The competition wasn't quite so stiff for Slash in its early days as a spinoff of Slash magazine. Founded in 1977 and published and edited by Steve Samiof, Melanie Nissen, Claude Bessy and Philomena, Slash was the jungle drum that pounded out the state of the revolution to devoted punk fans.

"Slash's one and only goal was to fight complacency," said Samiof, now working as a free-lance designer. "And there was a golden moment where we were more or less living what we wrote."

In the spirit of that time, Slash Records came into being as part of a holy mission. Los Angeles' most revered punk band of the day, the Germs, was playing at its peak and simply had to be recorded for posterity. So, the Slash staff looked around to see who had some spare cash and spotted Biggs, who was living next door to the Slash office. Intrigued by the Germs, Biggs put up $1,000 to record a single and thus bought his first piece of the company.

"The Germs were dealing with ideas normally relegated to the fine-art world yet they also had a strong popular appeal, so I saw them as a way to take an esoteric idea and try to sell it to a mass audience," Biggs said. "I can't say I succeeded because the Germs never had a hit record, but they were very influential."

The Germs were indeed influential—countless young musicians cite group leader Darby Crash as a central influence—but they soon fell victim to their own scorched-earth policy. The most anarchically primitive band ever to spring forth from the land of the Beach Boys, the Germs functioned at an intensity that couldn't be maintained for long.

The group managed to record one album, "Germs G.I.," before Darby Crash took his own life Dec. 8, 1981, the day before ex-Beatle John Lennon was slain.

The L.A. punk scene was rapidly degenerating. Once it became apparent that there was gold in them thar mohawks, the sense of camaraderie central to the scene began to erode. Warring punk factions sprang up while other people had their fill of the party and returned to their pre-punk existences. By 1979 Slash's original gang of four wanted out.

Said Samiof, "Claude and Philly moved to England, and Melanie and I felt that Slash [Records] had reached the point where it had to expand or die. The way I saw it, in order for it to grow we had to get into the kind of music-industry back-scratching Slash was committed to destroying, and I just didn't want to compromise. This isn't to imply that Bob came in and had no morals. He just came in with a different set of goals."

An assessment Biggs agrees with.

"I wouldn't describe myself as a music fan and specific styles of music don't interest me," he said. "But I wouldn't put out a record I didn't find some merit in. I put out records I think are necessary and the challenge of getting a mass audience to agree they're necessary is what's fun for me.

"If I were a consummate fan I'd be incapable of making certain business moves because I'd consider the music too precious. My job is to find—or create—a market for a record and that requires me to be a bit ruthless at times. You have to be willful to run a record company and if you ever play victim you're dead. This business is about survival of the fittest and it requires mental toughness and the ability to bluff."

Biggs did a lot of bluffing in the company's early years. Slash's street credibility was strong but the company was on shaky financial legs.

Things began to change in 1980 with the relase of "Los Angeles," the debut LP by X, L.A.'s best-loved punk band. A critical smash, the record sold reasonably well, and the group's follow-up LP, "Wild Gift," did even better. It did so well that Elektra Records forked over a fair amount of money to lure X from Slash, and the major labels began to eye hungrily Biggs' chicken coop of young bands.

Slash did have a remarkable knack for spotting and signing the next big thing while its price tag was still within reason. Among Slash's discoveries: the Dream Syndicate, Fear, Violent Femmes, Rank and File, Green on Red, and the Gun Club. Slash's stable of artists was so solid that Warner Bros. Records signed a distribution deal with Slash—a move that prompted accusations of sellout from the die-hard punk community.

"Some people think the way Slash developed was politically incorrect but I feel no obligation to stand by a particular style of music to the bitter end," said Biggs.

"I've never felt that the label stood for a specific set of ideals I was obliged to uphold. It might stand for honesty of expression and artists who are concerned with integrity in their own work, but the label itself is not about those things."

The issue of Slash's "sellout" prompts the question: Is it possible to sell out a movement that has ceased to exist?

"Slash took a hard line when it first came out in 1977 but the culture was ripe for that kind of idealism then," Samiof said. "There'd be no point in presenting a similar ideology now because you couldn't muster the support from the troops.

"I saw very few people from L.A.'s original punk scene at Slash's 10-year anniversary party last month. I think they all went off and got married and had kids. People seem to be living more superficially right now and are concerned with wealth, power and material goods. They say the mood of a culture runs in cycles but I can't remember things ever being the way they are now."

The culture certainly doesn't seem to be much in the mood for a revolution—in fact, it appears to be feeling rather nationalistic. This too is a trend Slash has capitalized on.

"Slash's punk profile seems to be evolving into an American roots-music image," Biggs said. "The most successful band on the label is Los Lobos whose music is very much about taking pride in simple American values.

"The same is true of the Blasters and rootsy Midwestern bands like the BoDeans and the Violent Femmes. I must admit, I didn't have any long-range plan in mind when I signed those bands. I signed them for the simple reason that they seemed to be making the most honest music I was hearing."

Los Lobos has been a commercial boon to Slash, but the company's financial health has more to do with its solid relationship with Warner Bros. Warners protects the Slash artist roster from being raided by other big labels, and has the

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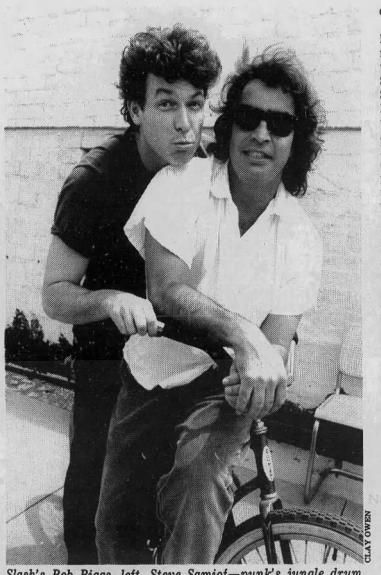
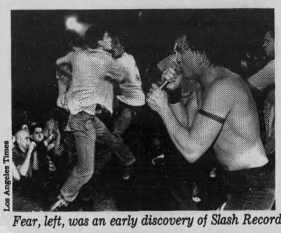


CLAY OWEN

Slash's Bob Biggs, left, Steve Samiof—punk's jungle drum.



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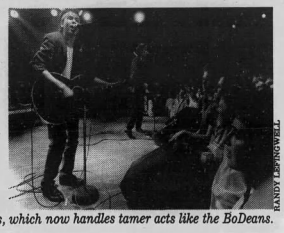

RANDY LEINGWELL

Fear, left, was an early discovery of Slash Records, which now handles tamer acts like the BoDeans.

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